



PC: *Rotting Plums*, Rachel Bess.

## Gratitude

### The Ideology of Sovereignty in Crisis

Christian SORACE

In the midst of the pandemic, expressions of gratitude are everywhere. The appreciation of frontline workers can be heard from the balcony singing of Northern Italy to the nightly applause across New York City rooftops. Even the wolves of my own state of Colorado seem to be contributing their evening howls (Gruenauer 2020). Meanwhile, mental health experts encourage us to remain ‘grounded’ through gratitude meditations. *Psychology Today* lists the life-affirming benefits of ‘Gratitude in a Time of Pandemic’ (Alti 2020), while the Mayo Clinic (2020) enjoins us to ‘Discover Gratitude’ as a strategy to preserve our mental and physical health. But what is gratitude, and why is it having a moment right now?

Gratitude is the appreciation of our vulnerability and dependence on others. Covid-19 reminds us that no person is an island; we exist in webs of dependence and chains of

production that connect us to the immigrant worker who harvests produce, the truck driver who delivers it, and the local cashier at WholeFoods. When these threads—so often taken for granted—become frayed, gratitude is an attempt to symbolically repair them.

## Gratitude as an Alibi

While gratitude appears, on the face of it, to be a constructive response to the current crisis, it can also be an affective alibi for what Saidiya Hartman (2020) refers to as the ‘gratuitous violence’ of racialised and unequal societies and geopolitical relations—we are not all in this together. As a public discourse, gratitude can easily slip from a recognition of individuals to an acceptance of the systems that reproduce their exploitation. Can one really be grateful for

a world in which blood samples with Covid-19 antibodies are sold for astronomical prices and the lives of low-wage workers are being risked and sacrificed to maintain corporate profits under the guise of keeping the economy running, rather than imagining what it would take to build a post-capitalist economy that will not destroy the planet? Instead of gratitude for the *world as it is*, I prefer to think of the risks we take and care we give to each other as instances of solidarity and comradeship in the fight for the *world as it could be* (Dean 2019).

But to glimpse that world, we need to see through the mystifications of this one. Although gratitude is praised as an *ethical disposition*, the *politics of gratitude* ensnares us in a complicated logic of sovereignty, indebtedness, and de-politicisation. Behind its warm edges lies the moralising and silencing accusation of being ungrateful. What does it mean when gratitude is no longer a spontaneous emotional response but *something that is asked from us*?

## Petty Politics

In the United States, Donald Trump delayed Covid-19 relief cheques, which are critical for many people who have lost their jobs and health care, because he insisted that his signature be on them (Rein 2020)—a tacky reminder of the sovereign giver behind the gift. With a blatant disregard for the temporalities of life and death, he demanded that state governors express their gratitude to him in return for the distribution of life-saving medical resources, such as ventilators and personal protective equipment (Mackey 2020). ‘All I want them to do—very simple—I want them to be appreciative. I don’t want them to say things that aren’t true. I want them to be appreciative. We’ve done a great job.’

This is also how Trump mercurially conducts foreign policy. Other countries are not grateful enough to the United States for its role and investment in propping up the global order. Lest we are tempted to dismiss this as a

quirk of Trump’s narcissism and not a feature of American imperialism, recall—recently rehabilitated in public opinion—George W. Bush complaining in 2007 that the Iraqis whose lives he destroyed do not feel sufficiently grateful (Kaplan 2007): ‘I think the Iraqi people owe the American people a huge debt of gratitude. I mean ... we’ve endured great sacrifices to help them ... [and] wonder whether or not there is a gratitude level that’s significant enough in Iraq.’ As Mimi T. Nguyen (2012) has shown, this is a broader pattern of American culture; after being granted citizenship in the United States, refugees from areas devastated by US imperialism are expected to show ‘gratitude’ for the ‘gift of freedom’.

## China as Antithesis?

While many Americans were rightfully outraged and scandalised by the hysterical demands of our petty sovereign, as a scholar of Chinese politics, I had an uncanny moment of *déjà-vu*. In my book on the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, I wrote about how Chinese Communist Party officials demanded gratitude from the disaster victims and even launched gratitude education campaigns in the earthquake zone (Sorace 2017). In May 2018, the tenth anniversary of the earthquake was celebrated as a ‘day of gratitude’ (感恩日).

More recently, on 7 March 2020, the newly appointed Wuhan Communist Party secretary Wang Zhonglin encouraged local residents embarking on their third month of quarantine to ‘carry out gratitude education among the citizens of the whole city, so that they thank the General Secretary [Xi Jinping], thank the Chinese Communist Party, heed the Party, walk with the Party, and create positive energy’—a demand that met with outrage and ridicule and was swiftly removed from the municipal government’s official WeChat page (Bandurski 2020).

China's demand for gratitude and recognition for its 'heroic steps to fight the virus' (Wong and Mozur 2020) and aid to foreign countries that are in dire need of medical equipment has also become a new feature of Chinese soft power and global diplomacy (Repnikova 2020). In some cases, China's plea for gratitude has been requited, in scenes such as when 'the Serbian president kissed the Chinese flag as he welcomed a shipment of medical supplies on the tarmac' (Allen-Ebrahimian 2020). In others, it has caused alarm and furthered anti-China sentiment (Erlanger 2020).

The US government urges Americans to think of so-called Communist China as the antithesis of the United States. It seems to be the one thing the Democratic and Republican parties can agree on, especially as the 2020 presidential election promises to be a spectacle of cockfighting over who is tougher on China (Beinart 2020). But perhaps this discussion of gratitude can provide an occasion to consider the irrationality and absurdity of what we accept as normal in mainstream political discourse. For starters, why, in the midst of this unprecedented political, economic, epistemic, and health crisis, are both of the world's superpowers demanding gratitude?

## **Popular Sovereignty**

Although it may not be immediately apparent from the other side, in both political systems, the people are sovereign and do not owe the government any gratitude whatsoever. The government rules only at the behest of and on the basis of the consent of the governed. The Chinese writer Fang Fang articulates this point with disarming clarity in the following lines from her blog about life under quarantine: 'The government is the people's government; it exists to serve the people ... Government, please take away your arrogance, and humbly be grateful to your masters—the millions of people of Wuhan' (Bandurski 2020).

In both countries, however, consent is mediated through liturgical rituals of power rather than actively given. In the United States, studies have shown that ordinary citizens have almost zero impact on policy formulation and decision-making (Gilens and Page 2014). In China, the Communist Party governs in opaque secrecy while being occasionally responsive to popular opinion and protest. What no one wants to admit is that both Chinese and American citizens live under the residual aura of the promise of popular sovereignty. As Partha Chatterjee (2019, 113) puts it, 'the people, in other words, were sovereign, without exercising sovereign power.'

One of the ways that aura is maintained is through affective compensation. While Xi Jinping promises to 'rejuvenate the great Chinese nation', which is really a Chinese version of 'Make America Great Again', Trump seduces Americans into believing that he embodies their stolen sovereignty. The difference between these fantasies of reclamation is that they are carried by opposite trajectories. Trump's demand for gratitude is the expression of an empire in decline, whereas China's demand for gratitude registers the insecurity of the not quite.

Despite their differences, in both China and the United States, gratitude is the ideology of sovereignty in crisis. It calls on us to emotionally accommodate the world on offer, while insinuating that it might be gone tomorrow. Don't ask for a better life, be grateful for what you have. These hysterical demands reveal the insecurity of sovereign power.

## **Beyond Refusal**

In the poetic lines of a nurse working in one of the makeshift hospitals in Wuhan, gratitude is refused: 'Please don't decorate me in garlands / Don't give me applause / Spare me recognition for work injury, martyrdom, or any other merits' (Wei 2020). Aware of how

her work at the frontlines feeds back into the Communist Party's self-adulation, the nurse demands to be left alone so she can have a good night's sleep. Her poem is a refusal of the political instrumentalisation of duty, risk, and courage. This sentiment is being echoed among health care workers in the United States who 'don't want glory. We just want our jobs to be protected—in every sense' (Khan 2020).

This refusal allows the poet to 'breathe undisturbed' for a precious moment and makes the sound of 'slogans' and 'propaganda' ring hollow. We can hear the anxious voice of the sovereign calling on us to be grateful. But for how long before its fragility is drowned out in what Fred Moten (2018, 149) describes as the 'noisy parallel track to American military/corporate power' that mistakes itself for a public sphere? Or, silenced in the shrill jubilation of Chinese state-nationalism?

When one is drowning, gratitude can feel like a life vest. To survive the perils of floating in deep ocean, it is natural to conjure and fixate on a shore that brings a horizon into focus—a feeling of anticipation and gratitude for when this will be over, and life can return to normal. But what if normalcy is only a mirage? Sovereign power smells blood in the water, it preys on vulnerability. It extends a hand to the shipwrecked overboard on the condition of reciprocated gratitude. Although we should refuse this call and take what already is collectively ours, not only is refusal dangerous, but it is also not enough.

The problem with refusal alone is that it is an aesthetic gesture which, at most, makes a temporary cut in ideology. But the skin of ideology heals quickly. Refusal, without an organised politics behind it, barely scratches the surface. ■

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